

Chapter Five

LANGUAGE AS SOCIAL SEMIOTIC: TOWARDS A GENERAL SOCIOLINGUISTIC THEORY (1975)¹

Introductory

Probably the most significant feature of linguistics in the 1970s is that man has come back into the centre of the picture. As a species, of course, he was always there: his brain, so the argument ran, has evolved in a certain way – *ergo*, he can talk. But truly speaking man does not talk; **men** talk. People talk to each other; and it is this aspect of man's humanity, largely neglected in the dominant linguistics of the 1960s, that has emerged to claim attention once more.

Linguistics is a necessary part of the study of people in their environment; and their environment consists, first and foremost, of other people. Man's ecology is primarily a social ecology, one which defines him as 'social man'; and we cannot understand about social man if we do not understand about language. In order to suggest this perspective, linguists came to talk of "sociolinguistics"; and this term has been repeatedly discussed and evaluated in relation to various quasi-synonyms such as "sociological linguistics", proposed by Firth (1935), "institutional linguistics" (Hill 1958) and "sociology of language" (Fishman 1967). There is some consensus to the effect that the study of language in its social context is simply an aspect or facet of linguistics, while anything that is interpreted as significant covariation between

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linguistic and sociological phenomena lies beyond the boundaries of linguistics properly so-called. In practice, however, “sociolinguistics” continues to be used as a cover name for a variety of different topics ranging from linguistic demography at one end to the sociology of knowledge at the other; and the question arises to what extent these very disparate areas of enquiry have anything in common. Is there any sort of integrated picture of the relation of language to other social phenomena, a general framework expressing the social meaning of language, to which these studies relate and through which they relate to each other? It is the intention of the present paper to explore this question. It may be said in advance that, while nothing so definite as a conclusion will be reached, the terminal direction will be towards integration – towards eliminating boundaries rather than imposing them, and towards a unifying conception of language as a form of social semiotic.

Sociolinguistics sometimes appears to be a search for answers which have no questions. Let us therefore enumerate at this point some of the questions that do seem to need answering.

1. How do people decode the highly condensed utterances of everyday speech, and how do they use the social system for doing so?
2. How do people reveal the ideational and interpersonal environment within which what they are saying is to be interpreted? In other words, how do they construct the social contexts in which meaning takes place?
3. How do people relate the social context to the linguistic system? In other words how do they deploy their meaning potential in actual semantic exchanges?
4. How and why do people of different social class or other sub-cultural groups develop different dialectal varieties and different orientations towards meaning?
5. How far are children of different social groups exposed to different verbal patterns of primary socialization, and how does this determine their reactions to secondary socialization especially in school?
6. How and why do children learn the functional-semantic system of the adult language?
7. How do children, through the ordinary everyday linguistic interaction of family and peer group, come to learn the basic patterns of the culture: the social structure, the systems of knowledge and values, and the diverse elements of the social semiotic?

1. Some areas of sociolinguistic research

A list of topics that come under the heading of sociolinguistics might include the following (from Chapter 4, above):

1. Macrosociology of language; linguistic demography
2. Diglossia; multilingualism and multidialectalism
3. Language planning; development and standardization
4. Pidginization and creolization
5. Social dialectology; description of non-standard varieties
6. Educational sociolinguistics
7. Ethnography of speaking; speech situations
8. Register; verbal repertoire and code switching
9. Social factors in phonological and grammatical change
10. Language and socialization; language in the transmission of culture
11. Sociolinguistic approach to language development in children
12. Functional theories of the linguistic system
13. Linguistic relativity
14. Microsociology of knowledge (ethnomethodological linguistics)
15. Theory of text.

We shall try to take up some of the questions that have been being investigated under these headings, in order to suggest where they link up with each other and to see how far they already form part of a general pattern.

1.1 Linguistic interaction

Somehow the participants in speech encounters interpret one another's symbolic behaviour; they assign each other roles and statuses, accept and act on instructions and explanations, and in general exchange meanings which derive from every kind of social context. They do this first and foremost by attending to text, which is language in a context of situation – language in the environment of other semiotic structures and processes. But we have very little conception of **how** they do it. Cicourel (1969) suggests that participants operate with four interpretative principles, “reciprocity of perspective”, “normal forms”, “the “etcetera” principle” and “descriptive vocabulary as indexical expressions”. In other words, each individual assumes that others (i) see things in the same way as he does, (ii) agree on what to leave out, (iii) fill in what has been left out and (iv) use language in the same way to refer to past experience. These principles act as “instructions for the speaker-

hearer for assigning infinitely possible meanings to unfolding social scenes”.

Similar ideas are embodied in ethnomethodological linguistic studies such as those of Sacks and Schegloff, for example Schegloff’s account of how people refer to location. Schegloff (1971) shows that the speaker derives from the context of situation the relevant criteria for deciding which of a number of possible strategies for identifying places and persons is the ‘right’ one in the particular circumstances; and he concludes that “interactants are context-sensitive”. This is similar to the way in which a speaker selects the appropriate information focus, distributing the text into meanings that he is treating as recoverable to the hearer (“given”) and meanings he is treating as non-recoverable (“new”) (Halliday 1967b). It is important to stress that a speaker also has the option of being ‘wrong’ – of deliberately organizing the meaning in a way that runs counter to the context of situation, with marked rhetorical effect.

The difficulty of integrating linguistic interaction studies with other areas of sociolinguistic research lies mainly in the lack of an explicit formulation of the relationship between the text, which is the *process* of interaction, and the linguistic *system*. How are the participants exploiting their semantic potential? And how does this potential relate systematically to features of the context of situation? We need answers to these questions if we are to make generalizations about how semiotic acts are encoded in language and linguistic meanings interpreted as semiotic acts.

1.2 The ecology of speech

From a sociolinguistic standpoint a text is meaningful not so much because the hearer does not know what the speaker is going to say, as in a mathematical model of communication, as because he does know. He has abundant evidence, both from his knowledge of the general (including statistical) properties of the linguistic system and from his sensibility to the particular cultural, situational and verbal context; and this enables him to make informed guesses about the meanings that are coming his way.

The speaker’s selection of options in the production of text is regulated by the ‘theory and system of speaking’ in the culture (Hymes 1967). Hymes postulates that the member has access to a set of sociolinguistic principles or “rules of speaking”, so that he knows “when to speak and when to remain silent, which code to use, when,

where and to whom, etc.”; in Grimshaw’s (1971) interpretation, he makes “generalizations about relationships among components” of the speech situation. What are the components of the speech situation? Hymes’ own formulation may be summarized as: the form and content of the message, the setting, the participants, the intent and the effect of the communication, the key, the medium, the genre and the norms of interaction. An example of an earlier formulation is provided by Firth (1950): the participants – their statuses and roles, the relevant features of the setting, the verbal and non-verbal action, and the effective result.

The difficulty of relating these notions to other sociolinguistic concepts lies in the fact that we do not know what kind of theoretical validity to ascribe to lists such as these. What are we to understand by “situation”, and what is its relation to the text? Both Firth and Hymes include the text itself among the “features” or “components” of the situation: Firth’s “verbal action of the participants”, Hymes’ “form and content of the message”. But we shall need to conceive of the ‘situation’ in more abstract terms, and of situational features as **determinants** of the text, enabling us to predict what the speaker is going to say in the same way that the hearer does (see Hymes 1971). Otherwise it is impossible to relate the text systematically to its environment (or Hymes’ ethnography of speaking to Sacks’ theory of linguistic interaction).

1.3 Functional theories of language

These have been mainly of four kinds: anthropological, e.g. Malinowski (1923, 1935); psychological, e.g. Bühler (1934); ethological, e.g. Morris (1967); or educational, e.g. Britton (1970). All these have in common the property of being extrinsic in orientation: they are not concerned with language as object but with language in the explanation of other phenomena. Hence they are meant to be interpreted as generalizations about language use rather than as explanations of the nature of the linguistic system (see Greenberg 1963, Chapter 7).

All these theories incorporate in one form or another the basic distinction between two primary semiotic roles that language serves: an ideational role, that of **being about** something, and an interpersonal role, that of **doing** something. Essentially the same distinction is expressed in the pairs of terms “narrative/active”; “representational (or “informative”)/expressive and conative”; “cognitive/social”; “semantic/stylistic”. Hymes uses the terms “referential/social” (also “socio-

expressive” and “stylistic”); he interprets the distinction as one between types of meaning expressed by different linguistic resources: “Languages have conventional units, structures and relations . . . that are what I shall call “stylistic” (serving social meaning) as well as referential” (1969). Linguists of the Prague School recognized a third component, which they called “functional sentence perspective”; this is the text-forming or textual role that language serves, and it is a role that is purely intrinsic to language (Daneš (ed.) 1974). So there is a general conception of language as serving two major functions; to which a third has to be added, of a somewhat different kind because intrinsic to language itself, if the functions are to be related systematically to linguistic structure.

The difficulty with the concept of functions of language, and its relation to a general sociolinguistics, is that the functions as usually conceived are neither concrete enough nor abstract enough. On the one hand it is difficult to relate them to the text, to what people actually say, since people nearly always seem to be using language in more than one ‘function’ at once; and on the other hand it is difficult to relate them to the linguistic system, because there are not, in fact, any recognizable linguistic entities – words, or grammatical constituents – that can be identified as serving just this or just that function, as expressing one type of meaning and not others. The problem arises through a false equation of ‘function’ with ‘use’. It is necessary to separate these two concepts in the sociolinguistic context, and also to suggest how they may come to be separated developmentally in the course of the learning of the mother tongue (Halliday 1975c).

1.4 Variety, variation and variability

It has always been recognized that dialectal variety in language reflected the social as well as the geographical provenance of the speaker, but it was Labov’s highly original studies of urban speech patterns which effectively extended the scope of dialectology from the regional to the social dimension (1966).

Unlike rural dialects, which could be and traditionally have been treated as systems of invariant forms, urban dialects display patterns of inherent variation. A city-dweller, at least in our society, typically switches among a range of different forms of a given variable, in general without being aware that he is doing so. A number of factors are involved in this switching, such as monitoring (adjustment to meet

the social conditions of the speech situation) and marking (adjustment for the purpose of signalling special social roles) (Labov 1970); but all of them in one way or another derive from the nature of social dialect as a manifestation of the social structure and particularly of its hierarchical nature.

A closely related phenomenon is that of code-switching, studied in detail by Gumperz (1971, Part II), in which speakers in multilingual contexts regularly switch between different languages, often within a sentence or even smaller unit. This likewise reflects the relative status, and also the functional specialization, of each language in the society in question.

Labov has demonstrated very convincingly that variation is inherent in the linguistic system. His work shows that, over and above the kind of variation that consists in socially motivated departure from an essentially stable norm, we have to recognize variability: that is, the system itself embodies variables, to some of which social values then tend to accrue.

The difficulty with variation and variability as **sociolinguistic** concepts (see Bickerton 1971) is to know what is the nature of the social meanings that are being realized through these patterns. How do the variants differ in meaning, and what is the **meaning** of choosing one rather than another? In other words, what is the semantics of the social structure that they are being made to express? It is not too difficult to relate variation in language to a general concept of subjective social stratification which has been derived from the study of this variation in the first place. The problem is to go further than this, by relating the linguistic phenomena to, and integrating them into, an independently established social theory with its own interpretation of social structure and social change.

1.5 Language, social structure and education

It is not difficult to demonstrate that, where there is a high rate of educational failure in urban areas, this failure tends to be associated with social class; roughly, the lower the family on the social scale (whether this is assessed intuitively or by means of some standardized measures) the greater the child's chances of failure.

Investigators concluded from this that there was a linguistic element in the situation; in some sense, language was to blame. If lower working-class children show significantly greater discrepancy between measures of verbal and non-verbal intelligence, a discrepancy which

tends to increase with age, then their language is holding them back; and this must mean their dialect, since it is the dialect that is distinctive. So educational failure is explained as language failure, with language interpreted as social dialect (Baratz and Shuy 1969; Shuy 1971; Williams 1970).

The language failure theory has taken two alternative forms, usually known as “deficit” and “difference”. The deficit version lays the blame on language as a **system**. According to this version, the language of the children concerned is deficient in some respect – it has not enough words, or not enough structures. The difference version lays the blame on language as an **institution**. It holds that the language of the children who fail is not deficient, but that the fact that it is different (from the standard language) acts just as much to their disadvantage because the standard language is required by the educational process, or else simply by social prejudice on the part of teachers and others. Either way, the child suffers.

Neither version of the theory is satisfactory, though for different reasons: the deficit version because it is not true, the difference version because, although it is true, it does not explain. There is no convincing evidence that children who fail in school have fewer words and structures at their command than those who succeed; and the notion of a defective dialect is in any case self-contradictory. But if children are failing because they speak a dialect that is different, they can certainly learn a second one, as children do in many cultures the world over. (This is not to deny, of course, that the attitudes towards their own speech forms are harmful and unjust. In fact, non-standard-speaking children often do learn standard speech forms, though not always for scholastic purposes.) This argument does not in any way destroy the sociolinguistic concept of a social dialect, as a language variety that is related to the social structure, one which expresses and symbolizes social hierarchy. But it removes it from the centre of the picture of the educational crisis.

1.6 Language and cultural transmission

What then are the significant social class differences in language, if any, and what are the social processes that give rise to them? Bernstein was the first to suggest an interpretation in terms of the transmission of the culture from one generation to the next.

It is a commonplace that a child’s primary socialization in family and peer group takes place largely through language. What Bernstein’s

work has shown is how the social structure comes to be represented and transmitted in the process. This takes place also through language. Bernstein postulated that linguistic interaction is regulated by socio-linguistic “codes”, or coding orientations, embodying two major variables: elaborated versus restricted, and person-oriented versus object-oriented. These determine the speech variants or types of discourse typically associated with particular situations. The meaning of ‘orientation towards persons or objects’ is clear. ‘Elaboration or restriction’ is more opaque; but an ‘elaborated’ variant is one which is more verbally explicit, which maintains social distance, demands individuated responses and makes minimal assumptions about the hearer’s intent; it thus tends towards less ambiguity in the situational reference and more ambiguity in the role relationships. The codes are general tendencies governing the range of meanings that speakers typically deploy.

The individual child’s exposure to the codes is, Bernstein suggests, a function of the system of role relationships within the family; and in particular of the balance between the “positional” system, in which role corresponds to ascribed status (the part played by the member is a function of position in the family), and the “personal” system, in which role corresponds to achieved status (the part played by the member is a function of his qualities as an individual). All combinations are found in all social classes, but, in Britain at least, strongly positional role systems tend to be found mainly in lower working-class families (where educational failure is high). It seems that a positional family structure tends to orient the members away from the elaborated, personal mode, in just those socializing contexts in which learning is associated with an adult authority figure, for example the context of parental control. But it is predominantly this mode that is demanded by the principles and processes of education as at present constituted. Hence the styles of meaning through which the culture is transmitted produce an incompatibility between lower working-class social norms and the middle-class ethos and the educational system that is based on it (Bernstein 1971). The difficulty here for a sociolinguistic theory is to understand how the codes are translated into linguistic interaction. By what mechanism do the differences in elaboration and orientation manifest themselves in the way people talk, to each other and to their children? Bernstein has made it clear from the start that these are not matters of social dialect, of varieties of lexicogrammatical and phonological realization. Either the codes are to be interpreted as different semantic systems, which as a general interpretation is

implausible (and has also been rejected by Bernstein, at one point), or there must be some channel through which they intercede between the semantic system and the text.

1.7 Sociolinguistics and language development

The learning of the mother tongue can be interpreted from one point of view as a sociolinguistic process, and such an interpretation is one component of the general sociolinguistic universe. Aside from Bernstein's work, and that which is derivative from him, there are currently three main avenues of research which lead in the direction of a developmental sociolinguistics. One is through semantics, one is along the lines of 'sociolinguistic competence' and the third is via a functional approach to the linguistic system.

Recent interest in the semantics of language development arose as an extension of psycholinguistic studies in the learning of vocabulary and structure; hence it has tended to focus on word meanings, conceptual structures and logical relations (see Eve V. Clark 1973). The study of the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence is concerned with how the child learns the social uses of language, the "rules of speaking" whereby his language meets the demands of the situation and the social structure (Susan M. Ervin-Tripp 1972, 1973). In the functional approach, learning the mother tongue has been interpreted as learning the set of functions that language serves and developing a meaning potential in respect of each (Halliday 1975*c*).

Each of these three approaches presents certain difficulties, including that of isolation from the other two. Work in the field of child semantics has focused on the acquisition of concepts as an aspect of cognitive development; but it has not sought to relate meaning to social context, or to interpret language as the realization of social meanings and the semantic system as the linguistic encoding of the social system. The concept of sociolinguistic or communicative competence derives from the acceptance of a sharp distinction between a highly idealized "competence" and a correspondingly belittled "performance", a distinction which is at best irrelevant, and at worst obstructive, in a sociolinguistic perspective; this tends to isolate the system from its use, and hence to obscure the fact that the system develops through interaction, as a meaning potential that is always related to social contexts. The problem for the functional approach is that of showing how meanings evolve in a functional context, and how a postulated

initial set of developmental functions of language come to be incorporated into the linguistic system (see 1.3 above). Finally the problem for all three approaches is to give some indication of how, and why, a child develops a linguistic system that has just the properties that human language has, and of how, and why, the human species developed such a system in the first place.

2. Elements of a sociosemiotic theory of language

In this section we shall refer to certain general concepts, inherent in these and related sociolinguistic studies, which form essential ingredients in any social-interactional theory of language. These are the text, the situation, the text variety or register, the code (in Bernstein's sense), the linguistic system (including the semantic system) and the social structure.

2.1 Text

Let us begin with the concept of text, the instances of linguistic interaction in which people actually engage: whatever is said, or written, in an operational context, as distinct from a citational context like that of words listed in a dictionary.

For some purposes it suffices to conceive of a text as a kind of 'supersentence', a linguistic unit that is in principle greater in size than a sentence but of the same kind. It has long been clear, however, that discourse has its own structure that is not constituted out of sentences in combination (sometimes referred to as a "macro" structure; see van Dijk 1972); and in a sociolinguistic perspective it is more useful to think of text as **encoded** in sentences, not as composed of them. (Hence what Cicourel refers to as omissions by the speaker are not so much omissions as encodings, which the hearer can decode because he shares the principles of realization that provide the key to the code.) In other words, a text is a semantic unit; it is the basic unit of the semantic process. It may be instantiated in various ways, as speech act, speech event, topic unit, exchange, episode, narrative and so on.

At the same time, text represents choice. A text is 'what is meant', selected from the total set of options that constitute what can be meant. In other words, text can be defined as actualized meaning potential.

The meaning potential, which is the paradigmatic range of semantic choice that is present in the system, and which the members of a culture

have access to in their language, can be characterized in two ways, corresponding to Malinowski's distinction between the "context of situation" and the "context of culture" (1923, 1935). Interpreted in the context of culture, it is the entire semantic system of the language. This is a fiction, something we cannot hope to describe. Interpreted in the context of situation, it is the particular semantic system, or set of sub-systems, which is associated with a particular type of situation or social context. This too is a fiction; but it is something that may be more easily describable (see 2.5 below). In sociolinguistic terms the meaning potential can be represented as the range of options that is characteristic of a specific situation type.

2.2 Situation

The situation is the environment in which the text comes to life. This is a well-established concept in linguistics, going back at least to Wegener (1885). It played a key part in Malinowski's ethnography of language, under the name of "context of situation"; Malinowski's notions were further developed and made explicit by Firth, who maintained that the context of situation was not to be interpreted in concrete terms as a sort of audio-visual record of the surrounding 'props' but was, rather, an abstract representation of the environment in terms of certain general categories having relevance to the text. The context of situation may be totally remote from what is going on round about during the act of speaking or of writing. Firth's characterization was referred to in 1.2 above.

It will be necessary to represent the situation in still more abstract terms if it is to have a place in a general sociolinguistic theory; and to conceive of it not as situation but as situation **type**, in the sense of what Bernstein refers to as a "social context". This is, essentially, a semiotic structure. It is a constellation of meanings deriving from the semiotic system that constitutes the culture.

If it is true that a hearer, given the right information, can make sensible guesses about what the speaker is going to mean – and this seems a necessary assumption, seeing that communication does take place – then this 'right information' is what we mean by the social context. It consists of those general properties of the situation which collectively function as the determinants of text, in that they specify the semantic configurations that the speaker will typically fashion in contexts of the given type.

However, such information relates not only 'downward' to the text but also 'upward', to the linguistic system and to the social system. The

'situation' is a theoretical sociolinguistic construct; it is for this reason that we interpret a particular situation type, or social context, as a semiotic structure. The semiotic structure of a situation type can be represented as a complex of three dimensions: the ongoing social activity, the role relationships involved, and the symbolic or rhetorical channel. We shall refer to these respectively as *field*, *tenor* and *mode* (following Halliday, McIntosh and Strevens 1964, as modified by Spencer and Gregory 1964; and see Gregory 1967). The field, corresponding roughly to Hymes' "setting" and "ends", is the field of social action in which the text is embedded; it includes the subject matter, as one special manifestation. The tenor, which corresponds in general to Hymes' "participants" and "key", is the set of role relationships among the relevant participants; it includes levels of formality as one particular instance. The mode, roughly Hymes' "instrumentalities" and "genre", is the channel or wavelength selected, which is essentially the function that is assigned to language in the total structure of the situation; it includes the medium (spoken or written), which is explained as a functional variable.

Field, tenor and mode are not kinds of language use, nor are they simply components of the speech setting. They are a conceptual framework for representing the social context as the semiotic environment in which people exchange meanings. Given an adequate specification of the semiotic properties of the context in terms of field, tenor and mode we should be able to make sensible predictions about the semantic properties of texts associated with it. To do this, however, requires an intermediary level – some concept of text variety, or register.

2.3 Register

The term *register* was first used in this sense, that of text variety, by Reid (1956); the concept was taken up and developed by Jean Ure (Ure and Ellis 1972), and interpreted within Hill's (1958) "institutional linguistic" framework by Halliday, McIntosh and Strevens (1964). The register is the semantic variety of which a text may be regarded as an instance.

Like other related concepts, such as "speech variant" and "(socio-linguistic) code" (Ferguson 1971, Chapters 1 and 2; Gumperz 1971, Part I), register was originally conceived of in lexicogrammatical terms. Halliday *et al.* drew a primary distinction between two types of language variety: dialect, which they defined as variety according to the

user, and register, which they defined as variety according to the use. The dialect is what a person speaks, determined by who he is; the register is what a person is speaking, determined by what he is doing at the time. This general distinction can be accepted, but, instead of characterizing a register largely by its lexicogrammatical properties, we shall suggest, as with text, a more abstract definition in semantic terms.

A register can be defined as the configuration of semantic resources that the member of a culture typically associates with a situation type. It is the meaning potential that is accessible in a given social context. Both the situation and the register associated with it can be described to varying degrees of specificity; but the existence of registers is a fact of everyday experience – speakers have no difficulty in recognizing the semantic options and combinations of options that are ‘at risk’ under particular environmental conditions. Since these options are realized in the form of grammar and vocabulary, the register is recognizable as a particular selection of words and structures. But it is defined in terms of meanings; it is not an aggregate of conventional forms of expression superposed on some underlying content by ‘social factors’ of one kind or another. It is the selection of meanings that constitutes the variety to which a text belongs.

2.4 Code

Code is used here in Bernstein’s sense; it is the principle of semiotic organization governing the choice of meanings by a speaker and their interpretation by a hearer. The code controls the semantic styles of the culture.

Codes are not varieties of language, as dialects and registers are. The codes are so to speak ‘above’ the linguistic system; they are types of social semiotic, or symbolic orders of meaning generated by the social system (see Hasan 1973). The code is actualized in language through the register, since it determines the semantic orientation of speakers in particular social contexts; Bernstein’s own use of “variant” (as in “elaborated variant”) refers to those characteristics of a register which derive from the form of the code. When the semantic systems of the language are activated by the situational determinants of text – the field, tenor and mode – this process is regulated by the codes.

Hence the codes transmit, or control the transmission of, the underlying patterns of a culture or sub-culture, acting through the socializing agencies of family, peer group and school. As a child comes to attend to and interpret meanings, in the context of situation and in the

context of culture, at the same time he takes over the code. The culture is transmitted to him with the code acting as a filter, defining and making accessible the semiotic principles of his own sub-culture, so that as he learns the culture he also learns the grid, or sub-cultural angle on the social system. The child's linguistic experience reveals the culture to him through the code, and so transmits the code as part of the culture.

2.5 The linguistic system

Within the linguistic system, it is the **semantic system** that is of primary concern in a sociolinguistic context. Let us assume a tristratal model of language, with a semantic, a lexicogrammatical and a phonological stratum; this is the basic pattern underlying the (often superficially more complex) interpretations of language in the work of Troubetzkoy, Hjelmslev, Firth, Jakobson, Martinet, Pottier, Pike, Lamb, Lakoff and McCawley (among many others). We can then adopt the general conception of the organization of each stratum, and of the realization between strata, that is embodied in Lamb's stratification theory (Lamb 1971, 1974).

The semantic system is Lamb's "semological stratum"; it is conceived of here, however, in functional rather than in cognitive terms. The conceptual framework was already referred to in 1.3 above, with the terms **ideational**, **interpersonal** and **textual**. These are to be interpreted not as functions in the sense of uses of language, but as functional components of the semantic system – **metafunctions** as we have called them elsewhere (Halliday 1974). (Since in respect both of the stratal and of the functional organization of the linguistic system we are adopting a ternary interpretation rather than a binary one, we should perhaps explicitly disavow any particular adherence to the magic number three. In fact the functional interpretation could just as readily be stated in terms of four components, since the ideational comprises two distinct subparts, the experiential and the logical; but the distinction happens not to be very relevant here.)

What are these functional components of the semantic system? They are the modes of meaning that are present in every use of language in every social context. A text is a product of all three; it is a polyphonic composition in which different semantic melodies are interwoven, to be realized as integrated lexicogrammatical structures. Each functional component contributes a band of structure to the whole.

The ideational function represents the speaker's meaning potential as an observer. It is the content function of language, language as about

something. This is the component through which the language encodes the cultural experience, and the speaker encodes his own individual experience as a member of the culture. It expresses the phenomena of the environment: the things – creatures, objects, actions, events, qualities, states and relations – of the world and of our own consciousness, including the phenomenon of language itself; and also the ‘metaphenomena’, the things that are already encoded as facts and as reports. All these are part of the ideational meaning of language.

The interpersonal component represents the speaker’s meaning potential as an intruder. It is the participatory function of language, language as doing something. This is the component through which the speaker intrudes himself into the context of situation, both expressing his own attitudes and judgements and seeking to influence the attitudes and behaviour of others. It expresses the role relationships associated with the situation, including those that are defined by language itself, relationships of questioner–respondent, informer–doubter and the like. These constitute the interpersonal meaning of language.

The textual component represents the speaker’s text-forming potential; it is that which makes language relevant. This is the component which provides the texture; that which makes the difference between language that is suspended *in vacuo* and language that is operational in a context of situation. It expresses the relation of the language to its environment, including both the verbal environment – what has been said or written before – and the non-verbal, situational environment. Hence the textual component has an enabling function with respect to the other two; it is only in combination with textual meanings that ideational and interpersonal meanings are actualized.

These components are reflected in the lexicogrammatical system in the form of discrete networks of options. In the clause (simple sentence), for example, the ideational function is represented by transitivity, the interpersonal by mood, and the textual by a set of systems that have been referred to collectively as “theme”. Each of these three sets of options is characterized by strong internal but weak external constraints: for example, any choice made in transitivity has a significant effect on other choices within the transitivity systems, but has very little effect on choices within the mood or theme systems. Hence the functional organization of meaning in language is built in to the core of the linguistic system, as the most general organizing principle of the lexicogrammatical stratum.

2.6 Social structure

Of the numerous ways in which the social structure is implicated in a sociolinguistic theory, there are three which stand out. In the first place, it defines and gives significance to the various types of social context in which meanings are exchanged. The different social groups and communication networks that determine what we have called the “tenor” – the status and role relationships in the situation – are obviously products of the social structure; but so also in a more general sense are the types of social activity that constitute the “field”. Even the “mode”, the rhetorical channel with its associated strategies, though more immediately reflected in linguistic patterns, has its origin in the social structure; it is the social structure that generates the semiotic tensions and the rhetorical styles and genres that express them (Barthes 1970).

Secondly, through its embodiment in the types of role relationship within the family, the social structure determines the various familial patterns of communication; it regulates the meanings and meaning styles that are associated with given social contexts, including those contexts that are critical in the processes of cultural transmission. In this way the social structure determines, through the intermediary of language, the forms taken by the socialization of the child. (See 1.6 above, and Bernstein 1971, 1974)

Thirdly, and most problematically, the social structure enters in through the effects of social hierarchy, in the form of caste or class. This is obviously the background to social dialects, which are both a direct manifestation of social hierarchy and also a symbolic expression of it, maintaining and reinforcing it in a variety of ways: for example, the association of dialect with register – the fact that certain registers conventionally call for certain dialectal modes – expresses the relation between social classes and the division of labour. In a more pervasive fashion, the social structure is present in the forms of semiotic interaction, and becomes apparent through incongruities and disturbances in the semantic system. Linguistics seems now to have largely abandoned its fear of impurity and come to grips with what is called “fuzziness” in language; but this has been a logical rather than a sociological concept, a departure from an ideal regularity rather than an organic property of sociosemiotic systems. The ‘fuzziness’ of language is in part an expression of the dynamics and the tensions of the social system. It is not only the text (what people mean) but also the semantic system (what they can mean) that embodies the ambiguity, antagonism,

imperfection, inequality and change that characterize the social system and social structure. This is not often systematically explored in linguistics, though it is familiar enough to students of communication and of general semantics, and to the public at large. It could probably be fruitfully approached through an extension of Bernstein's theory of codes (see Mary Douglas 1972). The social structure is not just an ornamental background to linguistic interaction, as it has tended to become in sociolinguistic discussions. It is an essential element in the evolution of semantic systems and semantic processes.

3. A sociolinguistic view of semantics

In this section we shall consider three aspects of a sociological semantics: the semantics of situation types, the relation of the situation to the semantic system, and the socio-semantics of language development. The discussion will be illustrated from a sociolinguistic study of early language development.

3.1 The semantics of situation types

A sociological semantics implies not so much a general description of the semantic system of a language but rather a set of context-specific semantic descriptions, each one characterizing the meaning potential that is typically associated with a given situation type (see 2.2 above; also Halliday 1972). In other words, a semantic description is the description of a register.

This approach has been used to great effect by Turner in a number of studies carried out under Bernstein's direction in London (Turner 1973). Turner's contexts in themselves are highly specific; he constructs semantic networks representing, for example, the options taken up by mothers in response to particular questions about their child control strategies. At the same time they are highly general in their application, both because of the size of the sample investigated and, more especially, because of the sociological interpretation that is put upon the data, in terms of Bernstein's theories of cultural transmission and social change.

The sociolinguistic notion of a situation type, or social context, is variable in generality, and may be conceived of as covering a greater or smaller number of possible instances. So the sets of semantic options that constitute the meaning potential associated with a situation type may also be more or less general. What characterizes this potential is its truly 'sociolinguistic' nature. A semantics of this kind forms the interface

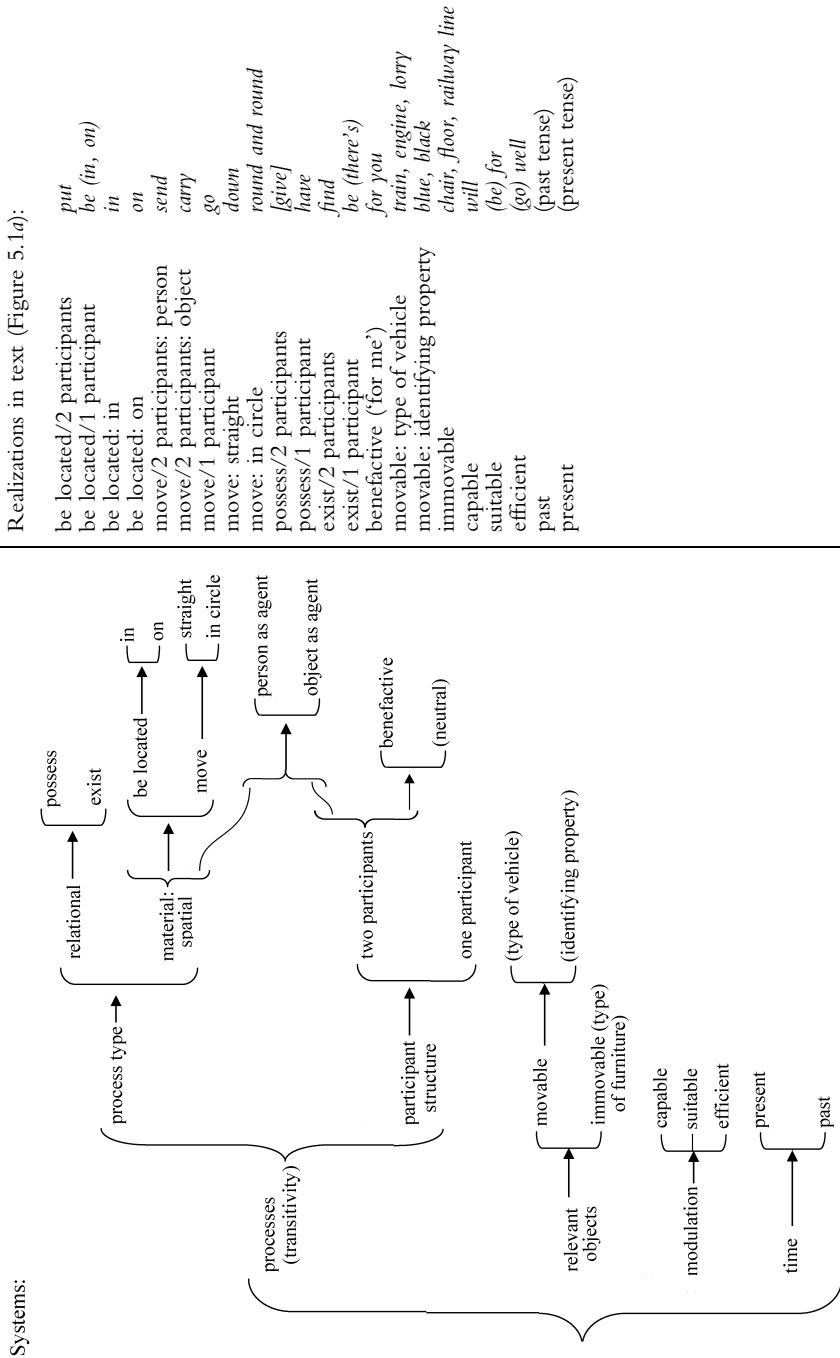
between the social system and the linguistic system; its elements realize social meanings and are realized in linguistic forms. Each option in the semantic network, in other words, is interpreted in the semiotics of the situation and is also represented in the lexicogrammar of the text. (Note that this is not equivalent to saying that the entire semiotic structure of the situation is represented in the semantic options, and hence also in the text, which is certainly not true.)

Figure 5.1 shows an outline semantic network for a particular situation type, one that falls within the general context of child play; more specifically, it is that of a small child manipulating vehicular toys in interaction with an adult. The network specifies some of the principal options, together with their possible realizations. The options derive from the general functional components of the semantic system (2.5 above) and are readily interpretable in terms of the grammar of English; we have not attempted to represent the meaning potential of the adult in the situation, but only that of the child. The networks relate, in turn, to a general description of English, modified to take account of the child's stage of development.

3.2 Structure of the situation, and its relation to the semantic system

The semiotic structure of a situation type can be represented in terms of the three general concepts of field, tenor and mode (see 2.2 above). The 'child play' situation type that was specified by the semantic networks in Figure 5.1 might be characterized, by reference to these concepts, in something like the following manner:

- Field Child at play: manipulating movable objects (wheeled vehicles) with related fixtures, assisted by adult; concurrently associating (i) similar past events, (ii) similar absent objects; also evaluating objects in terms of each other and of processes.
- Tenor Small child and parent interacting: child determining course of action, (i) announcing own intentions, (ii) controlling actions of parent; concurrently sharing and seeking corroboration of own experience with parent.
- Mode Spoken, alternately monologue and dialogue, task-oriented; pragmatic, (i) referring to processes and objects of situation, (ii) relating to and furthering child's own actions, (iii) demanding other objects; interposed with narrative and exploratory elements.



Realizations in text (Figure 5.1a):

be located/2 participants	put
be located/1 participant	be (in, on)
be located: in	in
be located: on	on
move/2 participants: person	send
move/2 participants: object	carry
move/1 participant	go
move: straight	down
move: in circle	round and round
possess/2 participants	[give]
possess/1 participant	have
exist/2 participants	find
exist/1 participant	be (there's)
benefactive ('for me')	for you
movable: type of vehicle	train, engine, lorry
movable: identifying property	blue, black
immovable	chair, floor, railway line
capable	will
suitable	(be) for
efficient	(go) well
past	(past tense)
present	(present tense)

Figure 5.1(a): Ideational

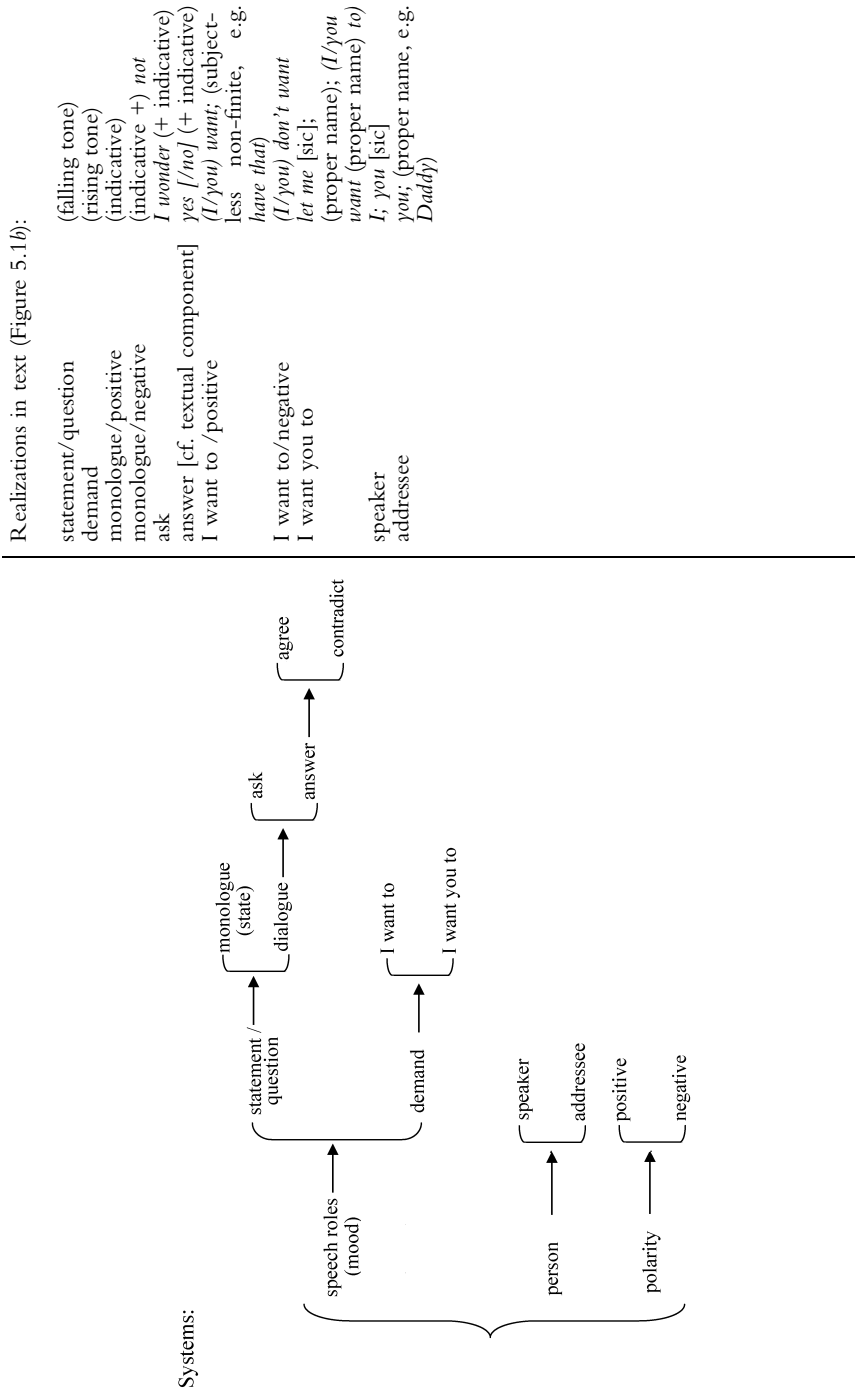


Figure 5.1(b): Interpersonal

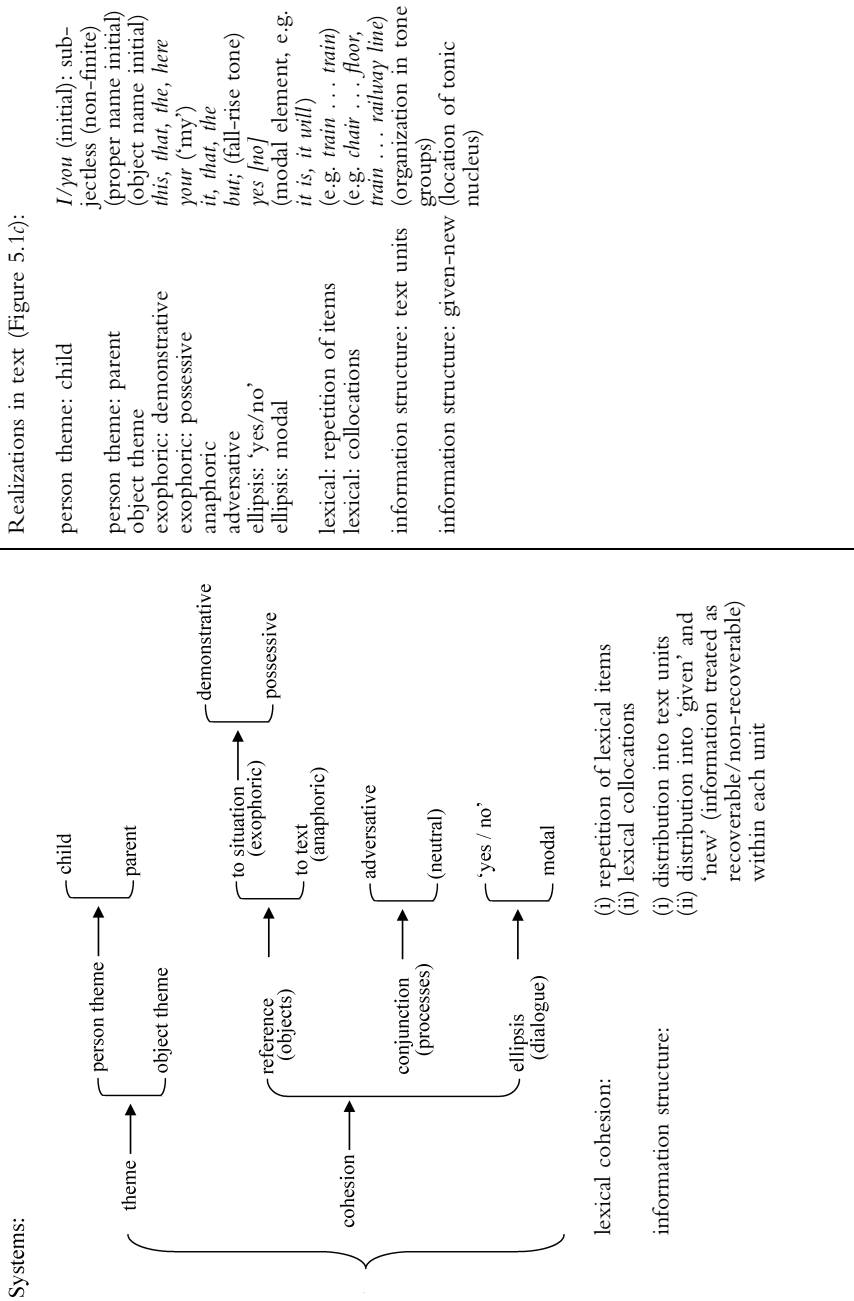


Figure 5.1(c): Textual
 Figure 5.1: Semantic systems and their realizations, as represented in Nigel's speech (text in 3.2)

Below is a specimen of a text having these semiotic properties. It is taken from a study of the language development of one subject, Nigel, from nine months to three and a half years; the passage selected is from age 1; 11. [Note: ` = falling tone; ´ = rising tone; ˇ = fall-rise tone; tonic nucleus falls on syllables having tone marks; tone group boundaries within an utterance shown by For analysis of intonation, see Halliday 1967a.]

Nigel [small wooden train in hand, approaching track laid along a plank sloping from chair to floor]: *Here the r  ilway line . . . but it not for the tr  in to go on that.* Father: *Isn't it?* Nigel: *Y  s t  s. . . . I wonder the train will carry the lorry* [puts train on lorry (sic)]. Father: *I wonder.* Nigel: *Oh yes it will. . . . I don't want to send the train on this fl  or . . . you want to send the train on the r  ilway line* [runs it up plank on to chair] . . . *but it doesn't go very well on the ch  ir. . . .* [makes train go round in circles] *The train all round and r  und . . . it going all round and r  und . . .* [tries to reach other train] *have that tr  in . . . have the blue tr  in* ('give it to me') [Father does so] . . . *send the blue train down the r  ilway line . . .* [plank falls off chair] *l  t me put the railway line on ch  ir* ('you put the railway line on the chair!') [Father does so] . . . [looking at blue train] *Daddy put sellotape on it* ('previously') . . . *there a very fierce lion in the train . . . Daddy go and see if the lion still there . . . Have your   ngine* ('give me my engine'). Father: *which engine? The little black engine?* Nigel: *Y  s . . . Daddy go and f  nd it f  r you . . . Daddy go and f  nd the black   ngine for you.*

Nigel's linguistic system at this stage is in a state of transition, as he approximates more and more closely to the adult language, and it is unstable at various points. He is well on the way to the adult system of mood, but has not quite got there – he has not quite grasped the principle that language can be used **as a substitute for** shared experience, to impart information not previously known to the hearer; and therefore he has not yet learnt the general meaning of 'yes/no question'. He has a system of person, but alternates between *I/me* and *you* as the expression of the first person 'I'. He has a transitivity system, but confuses the roles of Agent (Actor) and Medium (Goal) in a non-middle (two participant) process. It is worth pointing out perhaps that adult linguistic systems are themselves unstable at many points – a good example being transitivity in English, which is in a state of considerable flux; what the child is approximating to, therefore, is not something

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	Situational	Semantic
Field	manipulation of objects assistance of adult movable objects and fixtures movability of objects and their relation to fixtures recall of similar events evaluation	process type and participant structure benefactive type of relevant object type of location and movement past time modulation
Tenor	interaction with parent determination of course of action enunciation of intention control of action sharing of experience seeking corroboration of experience	person mood and polarity demand, 'I want to' demand, 'I want you to' statement/question, monologue statement/question, dialogue
Mode	dialogue reference to situation textual cohesion: objects textual cohesion: processes furthering child's actions orientation to task spoken mode	ellipsis (question-answer) exophoric reference anaphoric reference conjunction theme (in conjunction with transitivity and mood; typically, parent or child in demands, child in two- participant statements, object in one-participant statements) lexical collocation and repetition information structure

Figure 5.2: Determination of semantic features by elements of semiotic structure of situation (text in 3.2)

fixed and harmonious but something shifting, fluid and full of indeterminacies.

What does emerge from a consideration of Nigel's discourse is how, through the internal organization of the linguistic system, situational features determine text. If we describe the semiotic structure of the situation in terms of features of field, tenor and mode, and consider how these various features relate to the systems making up the semantic networks shown in Figure 5.1, we arrive at something like the picture presented in Figure 5.2.

There is thus a systematic correspondence between the semiotic structure of the situation type and the functional organization of the semantic system. Each of the main areas of meaning potential tends to be determined or activated by one particular aspect of the situation:

Semantic components		Situational elements
Ideational	systems activated by features of	Field
Interpersonal	systems activated by features of	Tenor
Textual	systems activated by features of	Mode

In other words, the type of symbolic activity (field) tends to determine the range of meaning as content, language in the ideational function; the role relationships (tenor) tend to determine the range of meaning as participation, language in the interpersonal function; and the rhetorical channel (mode) tends to determine the range of meaning as texture, language in its relevance to the environment. There are of course many indeterminate areas – though there is often some system even in the indeterminacy: for example, the child’s evaluation of objects lies on the borderline of “field” and “tenor”, and the system of “modulation” likewise lies on the borderline of the ideational and interpersonal components of language (Halliday 1969a). But there is an overall pattern. This is not just a coincidence: presumably the semantic system evolved as symbolic interaction among people in social contexts, so we should expect the semiotic structure of these contexts to be embodied in its internal organization. By taking account of this we get an insight into the form of relationship among the three concepts of situation, text and semantic system. The semiotic features of the situation activate corresponding portions of the semantic system, in this way determining the register, the configuration of potential meanings that is typically associated with this situation type, and becomes actualized in the text that is engendered by it.

3.3 Socio-semantics of language development

A child learning his mother tongue is learning how to mean; he is building up a meaning potential in respect of a limited number of social functions (see 1.7 above). These functions constitute the semiotic environment of a very small child, and may be thought of as universals of human culture.

The meanings the child can express at this stage derive very directly from the social functions. For example, one of the functions served by

the child's "proto-language" is the regulatory function, that of controlling the behaviour of other people; and in this function he is likely to develop meanings such as 'do that some more' (continue or repeat what you've just been doing), and 'don't do that'. How does he get from these to the complex and functionally remote meanings of the adult semantic system?

These language-engendering functions, or 'proto-contexts', are the origin at one and the same time both of the social context and of the semantic system. The child develops his ability to mean by a gradual process of generalization and abstraction, which in the case of Nigel appeared to go somewhat along the following lines. Out of the six functions of his proto-language (instrumental, regulatory, interactional, personal, heuristic and imaginative), he derived a simple but highly general distinction between language as a means of doing and language as a means of knowing – with the latter, at this stage, interpretable functionally as 'learning'. As he moved into the phase of transition into the adult system, at around 18 months, he assigned every utterance to one or another of these generalized functional categories, encoding the distinction by means of intonation: all 'learning' utterances were on a falling tone, and all 'doing' utterances on a rising tone. As forms of interaction, the latter required a response (increasingly, as time went on, a **verbal** response) while the former did not.

From the moment when this semantic principle was adopted, however, it ceased to satisfy, since Nigel already needed a semiotic system which would enable him to do both these things at once – to use language in both the learning mode and the doing mode within a single utterance. Without this ability he could not engage in true dialogue; the system could not develop a dynamic for the adoption and assignment of semiotic roles in verbal interaction. At this point, two steps were required, or really one complex step, for effectively completing the transition to the adult system. One was a further abstraction of the basic functional opposition, such that it came to be incorporated into his semantic system, as the two components of "ideational" and "interpersonal"; in the most general terms, the former developed from 'learning' function, the latter from the 'doing' function. The other step was the introduction of a lexicogrammar, or syntax, making it possible for these two modes of meaning to be expressed simultaneously in the form of integrated lexicogrammatical structures.

The term "socio-semantics of language development" refers to this process, whereby the original social functions of the infant's proto-language are reinterpreted first as *macro-functions*, and then as *meta-*

functions, functional components in the organization of the semantic system. These components, as remarked earlier (2.5), are clearly seen in the adult language; the options show a high degree of mutual constraint within one component but a very low degree of constraint between components. At the same time, looked at from another point of view, what the child has done is finally to dissociate the concept of ‘function’ from that of ‘use’; the functions evolve into components of the semantic system, and the uses into what we are calling social contexts or situation types. For a detailed treatment of this topic see Halliday (1975c).

4. Towards a general sociolinguistic theory

In this final section we shall try to suggest how the main components of the sociolinguistic universe relate to one another, the assumption being that this network of relations is the cornerstone of a general sociolinguistic theory.

4.1 Meaning and text

The *text* is the linguistic form of social interaction. It is a continuous progression of meanings, combining both simultaneously and in succession. The meanings are the selections made by the speaker from the options that constitute the *meaning potential*; text is the actualization of this meaning potential, the process of semantic choice.

The selections in meaning derive from different functional origins, and are mapped on to one another in the course of their realization as lexicogrammatical structure. In our folk linguistic terminology, the “meaning” is represented as “wording” – which in turn is expressed as “sound” (“pronouncing”) or as “spelling”. The folk linguistic, incidentally, shows our awareness of the tristratal nature of language.

4.2 Text and situation

A text is embedded in a context of *situation*. The context of situation of any text is an instance of a generalized social context or situation type. The situation type is not an inventory of ongoing sights and sounds but a semiotic structure; it is the ecological matrix that is constitutive of the text.

Certain types of situation have in their semiotic structure some element which makes them central to the processes of cultural

transmission; these are Bernstein's "critical socializing contexts". Examples are those having a regulative component (where a parent is regulating the child's behaviour), or an instructional component (where the child is being explicitly taught).

4.3 Situation as semiotic structure

The semiotic structure of the situation is formed out of the three socio-semiotic variables of **field**, **tenor** and **mode**. These represent in systematic form the type of activity in which the text has significant function (field), the status and role relationships involved (tenor) and the symbolic mode and rhetorical channels that are adopted (mode). The field, tenor and mode act collectively as determinants of the text through their specification of the register (4.5 below); at the same time they are systematically associated with the linguistic system through the functional components of the semantics (4.4).

4.4 Situation and semantic system

The semiotic components of the situation (field, tenor and mode) are systematically related to the functional components of the semantics (ideational, interpersonal and textual): **field** to the **ideational** component, representing the 'content' function of language, the speaker as observer; **tenor** to the **interpersonal** component, representing the 'participation' function of language, the speaker as intruder; and **mode** to the **textual** component, representing the 'relevance' function of language, without which the other two do not become actualized. There is a tendency, in other words, for the field of social action to be encoded linguistically in the form of ideational meanings, the role relationships in the form of interpersonal meanings, and the symbolic mode in the form of textual meanings.

4.5 Situation, semantic system and register

The semiotic structure of a given situation type, its particular pattern of field, tenor and mode, can be thought of as resonating in the semantic system and so activating particular networks of semantic options; typically options form within the corresponding semantic components (4.4). This process specifies a range of meaning potential, or **register**: the semantic configuration that is typically associated with the situation type in question.

4.6 Register and code

The specification of the register by the social context is in turn controlled and modified by the *code*: the semiotic style, or “socio-linguistic coding orientation” in Bernstein’s term, that represents the particular sub-cultural angle on the social system. This angle of vision is a function of the social structure. It reflects, in our society, the pattern of social hierarchy, and the resulting tensions between an egalitarian ideology and a hierarchical reality. The code is transmitted initially through the agency of family types and family role systems, and subsequently reinforced in the various peer groups of children, adolescents and adults.

4.7 Language and the social system

The foregoing synthesis presupposes an interpretation of the social system as a *social semiotic*: a system of meanings that constitutes the ‘reality’ of the culture. This is the higher-level system to which language is related: the semantic system of language is a realization of the social semiotic. There are many other forms of its symbolic realization besides language; but language is unique in having its own semantic stratum.

This takes us back to the ‘meaning potential’ of 4.1. The meaning potential of language, which is realized in the lexicogrammatical system, itself realizes meanings of a higher order; not only the semiotic of the particular social context, its organization as field, tenor and mode, but also that of the total set of social contexts that constitutes the social system. In this respect language is unique among the modes of expression of social meanings: it operates on both levels, having meaning both in general and in particular at the same time. This property arises out of the functional organization of the semantic system, whereby the meaning potential associated with a particular social context is derived from corresponding sets of generalized options in the semantic system.

4.8 Language and the child

A child begins by creating a proto-language of his own, a meaning potential in respect of each of the social functions that constitute his developmental semiotic. In the course of maturation and socialization he comes to take over the adult language. The text-in-situation by

which he is surrounded is filtered through his own functional-semantic grid, so that he processes just what is interpreted in terms of his own social semiotic at any particular stage.

As a strategy for entering the adult system he generalizes from his initial set of functions an opposition between language as doing and language as learning. This is the developmental origin of the interpersonal and ideational components in the semantic system of the adult language. The concept of function is now abstracted from that of use, and has become the basic principle of the linguistic organization of meaning.

4.9 The child and the culture

As a child learns language, he also learns **through** language. He interprets text not only as being specifically relevant to the context of situation but also as being generally relevant to the context of culture. It is the linguistic system that enables him to do this; since the sets of semantic options which are characteristic of the situation (the register) derive from generalized functional components of the semantic system, they also at the same time realize the higher order meanings that constitute the culture, and so the child's focus moves easily between the microsemiotic and the macrosemiotic environment.

So when Nigel's mother said to him, 'Leave that stick outside; stop teasing the cat; and go and wash your hands. It's time for tea,' he could not only understand the instructions but could also derive from them information about the social system: about the boundaries dividing social space, and 'what goes where'; about the continuity between the human and the animal world; about the regularity of cultural events; and more besides. He does not, of course, learn all this from single instances, but from the countless socio-semiotic events of this kind that make up the life of social man. And as a corollary to this, he comes to rely heavily on the social system for the decoding of the meanings that are embodied in such day-to-day encounters.

In one sense a child's learning of his mother tongue is a process of progressively freeing himself from the constraints of the immediate context – or, better, of progressively redefining the context and the place of language within it – so that he is able to learn through language, and interpret an exchange of meanings in relation to the culture as a whole. Language is not the only form of the realization of social meanings, but it is the only form of it that has this complex property: to

mean, linguistically, is at once both to reflect and to act – and to do these things both in particular and in general at the same time. So it is first and foremost through language that the culture is transmitted to the child, in the course of everyday interaction in the key socializing agencies of family, peer group and school. This process, like other semiotic processes, is controlled and regulated by the code; and so, in the course of it, the child himself also takes over the coding orientation, the sub-cultural semiotic bias that is a feature of all social structures except those of a (possibly non-existent) homogeneous type, and certainly of all complex societies of a pluralistic and hierarchical kind.

4.10 Summary

Figure 4.1 (p. 141) is an attempt to summarize the discussion in diagrammatic form; the arrow is to be read as ‘determines’. What follows is a rendering of it in prose.

Social interaction typically takes a linguistic form, which we call *text*. A text is the product of indefinitely many simultaneous and successive choices in meaning, and is realized as lexicogrammatical structure, or *wording*. The environment of the text is the context of situation, which is an instance of a social context, or *situation type*. The situation type is a semiotic construct which is structured in terms of *field*, *tenor* and *mode*: the text-generating activity, the role relationships of the participants, and the rhetorical modes they are adopting. These situational variables are related respectively to the *ideational*, *interpersonal* and *textual* components of the *semantic system*: meaning as context (the observer function of language), meaning as participation (the intruder function) and meaning as texture (the relevance function). They are related in the sense that each of the situational features typically calls forth a network of options from the corresponding semantic component; in this way the semiotic properties of a particular situation type, its structure in terms of field, tenor and mode, determine the semantic configuration or *register* – the meaning potential that is characteristic of the situation type in question, and is realized as what is known as a “speech variant”. This process is regulated by the *code*, the semiotic grid or principles of the organization of social meaning that represent the particular sub-cultural angle on the social system. The sub-cultural variation is in its turn a product of the *social structure*, typically the social hierarchy acting through the distribution of family types having different familial role systems. A child, coming into the picture, interprets text-in-situation in terms of his generalized func-

tional categories of *learning (mathetic)* and *doing (pragmatic)*: from here by a further process of abstraction he constructs the functionally organized semantic system of the adult language. He has now gained access to the social semiotic; this is the context in which he himself will learn to mean, and in which all his subsequent meaning will take place.

The aim of this paper has been to interrelate the various components of the sociolinguistic universe, with special reference to the place of language within it. It is for this reason that we have adopted the mode of interpretation of the social system as a semiotic, and stressed the systematic aspects of it: the concept of system itself, and the concept of function within a system. It is all the more important, in this context, to avoid any suggestion of an idealized social functionalism, and to insist that the social system is not something static, regular and harmonious, nor are its elements held poised in some perfect pattern of functional relationships.

A 'socio-semiotic' perspective implies an interpretation of the shifts, the irregularities, the disharmonies and the tensions that characterize human interaction and social processes. It attempts to explain the semiotic of the social structure, in its aspects both of persistence and of change, including the semantics of social class, of the power system, of hierarchy and of social conflict. It attempts also to explain the linguistic processes whereby the members construct the social semiotic, whereby social reality is shaped, constrained and modified – processes which, far from tending towards an ideal construction, admit and even institutionalize myopia, prejudice and misunderstanding (Berger and Luckmann 1967, Chapter 3).

The components of the sociolinguistic universe themselves provide the sources and conditions of disorder and of change. These may be seen in the text, in the situation, and in the semantic system, as well as in the dynamics of cultural transmission and social learning. All the lines of determination are *ipso facto* also lines of tension, not only through indeterminacy in the transmission but also through feedback. The meaning of the text, for example, is fed back into the situation, and becomes part of it, changing it in the process; it is also fed back, through the register, into the semantic system, which it likewise affects and modifies. The code, the form in which we conceptualize the injection of the social structure into the semantic process, is itself a two-way relation, embodying feedback from the semantic configurations of social interaction into the role relationships of the family and other social groups. The social learning processes of a child, whether those of learning the language or of learning the culture, are among the most

permeable surfaces of the whole system, as one soon becomes aware in listening to the language of young children's peer groups – a type of semiotic context which has hardly begun to be seriously studied. In the light of the role of language in social processes, a sociolinguistic perspective does not readily accommodate strong boundaries. The 'sociolinguistic order' is neither an ideal order nor a reality that has no order at all; it is a human artefact having some of the properties of both.

*This article was first written during my tenure of a fellowship at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Stanford, California. I should like to express my gratitude to the Center for the opportunities which this afforded.

Notes

1. The present paper is reprinted by permission from *The First LACUS Forum 1974*, pp. 17–46, edited by Adam Makkai and Valerie Becker Makkai, published by Hornbeam Press, Columbia, SC.

